

How Disarmament Activists Saved the World from Nuclear War

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(Plenary address at the International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War World Congress, Basel, Switzerland, August 27, 2010)

I have some good news for you. Since the atomic bombings of August 1945, there has been a surprising level of nuclear restraint. After all, in the past 65 years only a relatively small number of nations have chosen to develop nuclear weapons, and no nation has used them to attack another. Also, even those nations that have developed nuclear weapons have accepted nuclear arms control and disarmament measures. Why? The explanation lies in a massive, worldwide nuclear disarmament campaign. This campaign is discussed in my book, Confronting the Bomb, and today, very briefly, I will describe it and, particularly, its very important effects.

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki sent a wave of public dismay across the globe in the mid- to late-1940s. People with strong moral convictions were deeply troubled by this mass murder of civilians. Their critique of the atomic bombing was voiced by small pacifist organizations. Many more people, however, feared that the development of nuclear weapons would lead to the destruction of the planet. Determined to avert nuclear annihilation, scientists' groups and world government organizations sprang up around the world. In Japan, the survivors of the bombing held antinuclear gatherings, including Hiroshima Day commemoration ceremonies.

Although this first surge of antinuclear activism faded with the heightening of the Cold War, the escalation of the nuclear arms race -- and particularly H-bomb tests -- triggered an even more vigorous upsurge of protest in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In a widely-publicized appeal, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein warned of a nuclear holocaust. Other prominent intellectuals, such as Albert Schweitzer and Linus Pauling, soon followed their example. Through the Pugwash

movement, developed by Russell and Joseph Rotblat, scientists on both sides of the "iron curtain" began a series of conferences on the nuclear danger.

"Ban-the-Bomb" movements sprang up in numerous nations: the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Britain, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand; the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and Women Strike for Peace in the United States; Gensuikyo and Gensuikin in Japan; and comparable movements in many Western and nonaligned countries. They distributed vast quantities of anti-nuclear literature, published chilling advertisements, and staged simultaneous protest marches in dozens of nations. With or without permission, these antinuclear agitators even held demonstrations in Communist nations. Here, courageous activists, such as Andrei Sakharov, also challenged official policy. Meanwhile, opinion polls revealed overwhelming popular distaste for nuclear war and support for abolishing nuclear weapons.

Starting in the mid-1960s and continuing into the mid-1970s, resistance to nuclear weapons declined dramatically. Exhausted by a decade of antinuclear struggle and convinced by the partial test ban treaty of 1963 that the era of nuclear crisis had ended, many activists retreated into private life. Still others were drawn into the anti-Vietnam War movement and other avant garde causes.

Even so, the struggle resumed in the late 1970s, when the end of the Vietnam War freed peace groups to focus on the nuclear issue and the Cold War reemerged. In this context, older antinuclear groups started to revive and newer ones to appear. By 1980, U.S. peace groups were lining up behind a "Nuclear Freeze." Meanwhile, West European groups, pulled together by an Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament (END), were gearing up to oppose the deployment of a new generation of devastating, intermediate-range Euromissiles.

This revival skyrocketed into mass protest after 1980, largely thanks to the advent of the hawkish Reagan administration, with its loose talk of nuclear war. END was soon coordinating a huge antinuclear campaign in Europe. Groups like CND (in Britain), the Interchurch Peace Council

(in the Netherlands), and People for Nuclear Disarmament in Australia mushroomed into mass movements that held vast protest rallies. In the fall of 1983, an estimated five million people took part in antinuclear demonstrations. In most Western countries, the movement could mobilize strong support from professional groups, religious bodies, unions, and social democratic parties.

Even in the Communist nations of East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, China, and the Soviet Union, small, independent nuclear disarmament groups emerged and publicly challenged official policy, despite the harassment and imprisonment of activists.

In the United States, Physicians for Social Responsibility and SANE grew rapidly. Meanwhile, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign drew the backing of most civil society organizations. Polls found that it had the support of 70 to 80 percent of the public.

Of course, the founding of International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War significantly enhanced the international strength of the movement. Organized by Doctors Bernard Lown and Evgeny Chazov, IPPNW held its first convention in March 1981, in Washington, DC, drawing doctors from twelve countries. By the time of its fifth international congress, in Budapest, IPPNW had affiliates in 41 nations, representing 135,000 physicians. Through most of its activities, it worked to discredit the very idea of nuclear war. But it also campaigned to halt the nuclear arms race, circulating a petition along these lines that netted more than a million signers – about 25 percent of the world's physicians. In October 1985, as a reflection of group's profound impact upon world affairs, it was announced that IPPNW had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Although protest against the Bomb waned in the late 1980s, the movement retained substantial strength. Only in the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, did it sharply decline.

Now, is there evidence of a connection between these upsurges of mass protest and policies of nuclear restraint? There is, and it is available in abundance. Here are some examples.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, numerous governments -- interested in building nuclear weapons but battered by waves of antinuclear protests -- decided, reluctantly, not to develop the Bomb. They included the governments of West Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland. The Japanese government, perhaps the most shell-shocked by the popular protests, issued a proclamation of three non-nuclear principles: a refusal to manufacture, possess, or introduce nuclear weapons into Japan. The Canadian government moved to phase nuclear weapons out of its national defense program.

In response to antinuclear agitation in later years, there were also important shifts in other lands. New Zealand banned visits of nuclear warships. Australia refused to test MX missiles. India halted work on nuclear weapons. The Philippines adopted a nuclear-free constitution and shut down U.S. military bases housing nuclear weapons. South Africa scrapped its nuclear weapons program.

But you might be thinking to yourselves: nothing stopped the U.S. government from proceeding with the nuclear arms race. Or did it? Let's examine the record carefully.

The Truman administration began with a very positive view of nuclear weapons and with no plans for nuclear arms controls. Truman regarded the Bomb as "the greatest thing in history." And yet, within a short time, under intense public pressure, the President came around to authorizing the development of the Baruch Plan -- the world's first serious nuclear disarmament proposal.

Similarly, when the Eisenhower administration came to office in 1953, it had no interest whatsoever in disarmament. Instead, it planned to respond to any form of Communist aggression by launching a full-scale nuclear war, as well as to integrate nuclear weapons into conventional war. Nuclear weapons, the President declared publicly, should "be used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else." But H-bomb tests unleashed such a torrent of protest that U.S. officials were forced to consider a nuclear test ban. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles conceded, there had developed "a popular and diplomatic pressure for limitation of armament that

cannot be resisted by the United States without our forfeiting the good will of our allies and the support of a large part of our own people."

By the late 1950s, U.S. action had become a political necessity. In 1957, after government weapons scientists made a sales pitch for continued nuclear testing, Eisenhower retorted that "we are . . . up against an extremely difficult world opinion situation." When, in March 1958, the Soviet government halted nuclear testing, Washington was on the spot. Nuclear testing was "not evil," Eisenhower complained, but "people have been brought to believe that it is." The result was a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing by the U.S., British, and Soviet governments.

Even when the Russians started up atmospheric tests again in the fall of 1961, the U.S. government remained hesitant. President Kennedy agreed with his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, who warned that there would be a "serious political reaction . . . were we to resume testing." Although, in April 1962, the Kennedy administration finally did resume atmospheric tests, it went to unprecedented lengths to secure a test ban treaty. That November, Kennedy met with Norman Cousins, the co-chair of SANE, and urged him to convince Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev of his sincerity in seeking such a measure. Cousins began shuttling between the two world leaders and, in the spring of 1963, persuaded Kennedy to deliver a speech that would signal a break with past hostility toward the Soviet Union. Delivered that June, this American University address turned the tide. An atmospheric test ban treaty was signed that summer.

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's National Security Advisor, wrote that this first nuclear arms control agreement "was achieved primarily by world opinion." Some officials were even more specific. Jerome Wiesner, Kennedy's White House science advisor, gave the major credit for pushing the president toward the treaty to SANE, Women Strike for Peace, and Linus Pauling.

The movement's effectiveness is underscored by its impact upon the Reagan administration. Ronald Reagan had opposed every nuclear arms control measure negotiated by Democratic or

Republican Presidents, and his top national security officials were drawn from the ultra-hawkish Committee on the Present Danger. The policy of these Reaganites was to sponsor a vast U.S. nuclear buildup.

But, in response to popular protest, they made important shifts in U.S. policy. Pressured by beleaguered West European government leaders, the Reagan administration announced the most radical disarmament proposal yet -- the "zero option," forgoing any installation of U.S. intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe, if the Russians would remove all of theirs. This offer was designed to dampen public protest. Key U.S. and other NATO officials went along with it in the expectation that the Russians would reject it, for it traded a U.S. deployment plan for Soviet SS-20 missiles already in place. But it did commit the U.S. government to a sweeping program of nuclear disarmament -- if a Soviet government was willing to take the plunge.

Public pressure also affected U.S. strategic arms policy. By building the MX missile, the administration planned a dramatic expansion and modernization of its ICBM system. But Congress -- and particularly Congressional Democrats (who had begun to court peace groups) -- refused to support the Reaganites' plan. Ultimately, after years of exhausting effort, the administration managed to secure funding for only 50 MX missiles. Furthermore, the Reagan administration found that the price of Senate support for building even token numbers of missiles was the display of a commitment to nuclear disarmament. As National Security Advisor Robert MacFarlane told me: "You had to have appropriations, and to get them you needed political support, and that meant that you had to have an arms control policy worthy of the name."

To be sure, the administration did begin deploying the cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe in late 1983. But, amid the massive public protests, Reagan grew seriously rattled. In October, he told his startled Secretary of State: "If things get hotter and hotter and arms control remains an issue, maybe I should go see [Soviet Premier Yuri] Andropov and propose eliminating

all nuclear weapons." Secretary of State George Shultz was horrified by this idea! But Shultz agreed that "we could not leave matters as they stood." As a result, in January 1984, Reagan delivered a remarkable speech calling for peace with the Soviet Union and for a nuclear-free world.

Once Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, in March 1985, the way was open for significant disarmament agreements. Gorbachev was not only a true believer in nuclear disarmament, but a movement convert. The Soviet leader's "New Thinking" -- by which he meant the necessity for peace and disarmament in the nuclear age -- came from a well-known antinuclear statement by Einstein in 1946, reiterated in the Russell-Einstein Appeal of 1955. Gorbachev's advisors have frequently pointed to the powerful influence upon Gorbachev of the Western nuclear disarmament movement. Gorbachev himself declared: "The new thinking . . . absorbed the conclusions and demands . . . of the movements of physicians, scientists, and . . . of various antiwar organizations."

Gorbachev met frequently with leaders of the nuclear disarmament campaign, and often took their advice. For example:

1. He initiated and later continued a unilateral Soviet nuclear testing moratorium on the advice of Bernard Lown (co-chair of IPPNW).
2. He decided against building a Star Wars antimissile system on the advice of key antinuclear scientists.
3. He split the Star Wars issue from the INF issue, thus taking the crucial step toward the INF treaty. This, too, was based largely on the arguments made to him by U.S. and Soviet antinuclear scientists, as well as on public pressure.

When Gorbachev suddenly called the U.S. bluff by agreeing to remove all the Euromissiles from Europe (the "zero option"), it dismayed NATO's hawks. But, as Shultz put it, "if the United States reversed its stand now . . . such a reversal would be political dynamite!" Or, as Kenneth Adelman, Reagan's hawkish director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, recalled: "We

had to take yes for an answer." Thus, in late 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty, which removed all intermediate range nuclear missiles from Europe.

Although the movement began to decline thereafter, it retained some influence upon public officials. The U.S. and British governments wanted to upgrade and expand short-range nuclear forces in Western Europe. But some West European governments (frightened at the prospect of a revival of public protest) resisted this move. When Gorbachev heightened popular demands for nuclear disarmament by removing short-range missiles from Eastern Europe, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker was appalled. He recalled: "We had to do something. . . . NATO could not afford another crisis over deploying nuclear weapons." Thus, President George H.W. Bush retreated, and eventually withdrew all U.S. short-range missiles from Western Europe unilaterally.

The impact of peace activists upon nuclear testing was even more direct. Since the mid-1980s, disarmament groups around the world had been working to end underground nuclear weapons explosions. Large demonstrations were organized at the U.S. nuclear test site in Nevada. Inspired by these actions, a massive Nevada-Semipalatinsk nuclear disarmament movement emerged in the Soviet Union, where it eventually forced the closure of the Soviet testing sites.

Meanwhile, sympathetic members of the U.S. Congress introduced a variety of bills to halt U.S. nuclear testing. In 1991, a freshman member of the House of Representatives -- indebted to peace groups for their political support -- agreed to sponsor a new Congressional attempt to terminate funding for U.S. nuclear tests. The final legislation, passed in the summer of 1992, ended underground nuclear testing by the United States.

Finally, in September 1996, representatives of countries from around the world celebrated the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Speaking at the U.N. ceremonies, U.S. Ambassador Madeleine Albright declared: "This was a treaty sought by ordinary people everywhere, and today the power of that universal wish could not be denied."

Popular pressure also constrained government leaders from using the Bomb. In 1956, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, complained that the atomic bomb had acquired "'a bad name,' and to such an extent that it seriously inhibits us from using it." Indeed, later that year, when some administration officials called for greater flexibility in the employment of nuclear weapons, Eisenhower retorted: "The use of nuclear weapons would raise serious political problems in view of the current state of world opinion."

Similarly, when it came to the Vietnam conflict, the Kennedy administration found nuclear war politically impossible. McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, maintained that the U.S. government's decision not to use nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War did not result from fear of nuclear retaliation by the Russians and Chinese, but from the terrible public reaction that a U.S. nuclear attack would provoke in other nations. Even more significant, Bundy maintained, was the prospect of public upheaval in the United States, for "no president could hope for understanding and support from his own countrymen if he used the bomb."

The nuclear taboo seemed to dissipate with the advent of the Reagan administration, whose top national security officials entered office talking of fighting and winning a nuclear war. But this position quickly changed, as the administration came to recognize that its glib, militarist talk was a political disaster. Starting in April 1982, Reagan began declaring publicly that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." He added: "To those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say: 'I'm with you!'"

Of course, government accommodation to public pressure has gone only so far. Over 23,000 nuclear weapons still remain in existence. But the nuclear arms race has been curbed, two-thirds of the world's nuclear weapons have been abolished, and nuclear war has been averted.

If the disarmament movement can mobilize against nuclear weapons as effectively in the future as it has done in the past, we can reach its long-sought goal: a nuclear weapons-free world.